

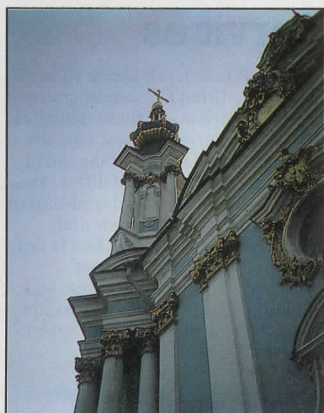
## Books



Ukrainian baroque or a barbarisation of form.

brick fields of St Petersburg and 11 million bricks were produced.

While little of the built fabric of this first era has survived — largely due to the poor quality of construction work that continued throughout the winter months — the inspiration for the extended development of the new city had been fostered. A city that while standing unique and strange in the northern lights, still prompted Algarotti to comment: "There reigns in this capital a kind of bastard architecture, one which partakes of the Italian, the French



and the Dutch." After a temporary return of the court to Moscow, the vision was eventually continued by Catherine II in the 1760s which although Western in its content, had shed many of the vestiges of the elaborate baroque of Rastrelli. This had achieved its finest expression in the Catherine Palace and Stroganov Palace both built in Leningrad around 1750, and was to be replaced by a neo-classicism. Under Catherine's reign, in order to give a "more European appearance", four hundred towns and cities were targeted for replanning in a regime that



Leningrad Avenue in the north.

extended to all parts of the empire, including the "Euro-Asian sprawl of Moscow". By the mid-1700s the Petrine revolution had been institutionalised with the first Russian academy of architecture producing its first graduates. Such young architects had been fully trained in the secrets and rules of Vignola and Vitruvius, thus irrevocably tying the development of 18th and 19th century Russian architecture to Europe.

All these processes are described by Cracraft in scholarly detail with a wealth of illustrations. It is a bit of a pity though

that there is a such predominance of European over Russian impressions of 18th century Moscow and St Petersburg. While Russian architectural history may embody a certain poverty, Russian literature contains a wealth of descriptions from men of letters, poets and novelists — Pushkin's masterpiece "mednie vcadnik" (the bronze horseman) being perhaps the most obvious and vivid image of the glory and catastrophe that was the building of the "gateway to Europe".

It is also a shame that Cracraft does not develop one of the more



To Leningrad's finest piece of "classicism".

tantalising comments he makes on the reasons why Russian traditional architecture came to an end. On the one hand he tells us its end was precipitated by a preference for a European style, on the other he maintains it was the inability of Russian builders with the productive forces at their disposal to meet the new demands of the ruling class. This is not so much a contradiction as a question of historical methodology. Cultural revolutions do not occur independently, and by themselves cannot explain the fundamental motors of historical change. His comment that St Petersburg was also born out of some kind of "economic necessity" is not fully explained but offers us a clue. Feudal society collapsed because feudal class relations hindered the further development of society's productive forces, resulting in a struggle between the emergent capitalist class and the old feudal ruling class.

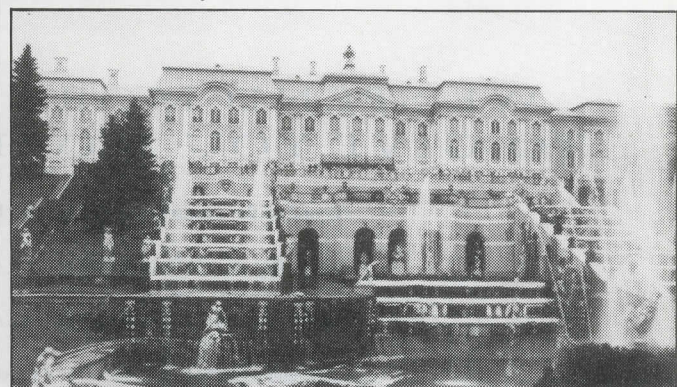
Through the opening of new trade routes, the Russian ruling class could perpetuate itself until the time that further economic development would demand a fundamental shift in property relations. Similarly, without the collapse of feudal class relations in Russia, the capabilities of Russian building production had absolute limits. In this way the construction of St Petersburg can be considered as a signal of the eventual and inevitable development of Russian capitalism, which while given a symbolic starting date with the emancipation of the serfs in 1861 clearly had earlier

roots. The structure of Russian feudal building production was clearly unable to meet the demands of the construction of modernism in the shape of St Petersburg. Such a vision required a level of industrialisation of the building process and far more advanced building methods that were inconceivable in 18th century Russia without an influx of Western skills.

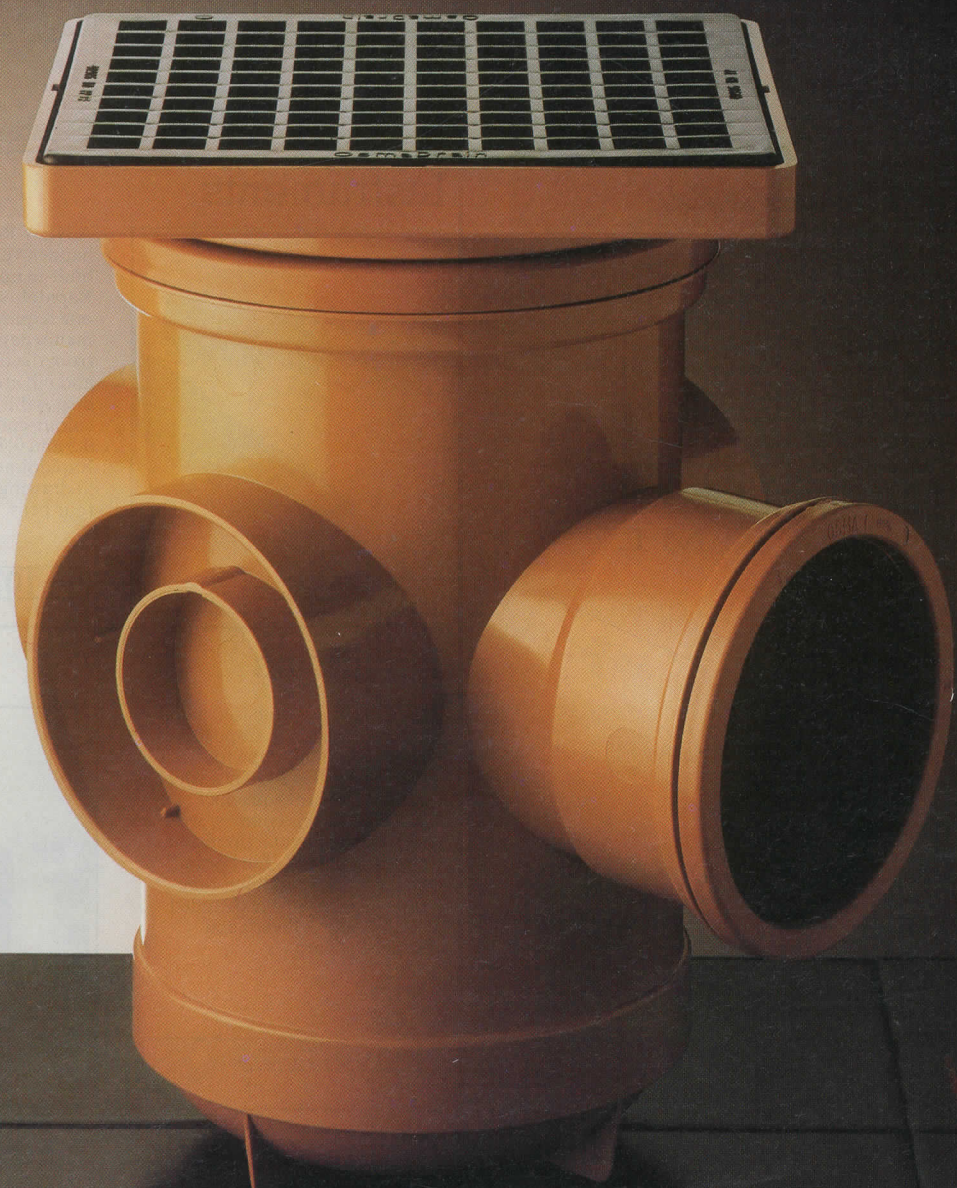
Thus short of an indigenous industrial revolution, Peter and subsequently Catherine, could only turn to the intellectual production and building technology that was appearing with the industrial revolutions of Europe. In this sense, Cracraft's assertion that it was taste and military and economic necessity that precipitated the Petrine revolution in architecture, while touching on some of the fundamental reasons behind historical change, tends to describe the phenomenon of a society at the beginning of transition from one mode of production to another, rather than the more fundamental process at work.

It is ironic that the founding of St Petersburg saw the simultaneous creation in the mid-1770s, particularly in the field of building materials production, of a young working class, which little more than a hundred years later would be active in creating a vision that far surpassed Peter's in its scale and consequences.

Jonathan Charley is an architect specialising in Soviet studies.



Peterhof, near Leningrad, Main Palace by Blond, Michetti and Rastrelli.



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